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A fitting year to hike Dylan Thomas trail

April 13, 2014 12:00 AM



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Dylan Thomas and his wife, Caitlin.

By Roger Rapoport / McClatchy-Tribune News Service

LAUGHARNE, Wales -- In his short life, Dylan Thomas became one of the world's first multimedia superstars through his spellbinding poetry, stage readings and dramatic writing for the stage, screen, radio and television.

Just 39 when he died in November 1953, Thomas also was an inspiration for a generation of younger artists, including Bob Dylan and John Lennon. Following his passing, countless girls were named in honor of his widow, Caitlin. His poetry, stories such as "A Child's Christmas in Wales" and the play "Under Milk Wood" remain central to the Welsh literary canon.

This year, the centenary of his birth, offers a perfect opportunity to take a hike along the Dylan Thomas trail. There is no better place to start this Welsh coastal journey than Browns Hotel, the Laugharne public house where he did some of his best work.

You never know who might join you for the Dylan Thomas 100 Festival. As I was leaving Browns, the owner suggested delaying my departure and joining the small crowd gathered outside. An hour later Prince Charles and the Duchess of Windsor greeted our group and made an unannounced visit to this literary shrine, just a short walk from the idyllic boathouse where Thomas lived with Caitlin and their children.

Something of a workaholic who rewrote his poems hundreds of times in the small writing shed above his residence, Thomas also was the life of the party on his legendary tours at home and across America. A series of multimedia Laugharne weekends this summer are offered as "less a Dylan Thomas festival than the kind of festival Dylan would have liked to go to," according to the Dylan Thomas Centennial program published by the sponsors of the Dylan Thomas 100 program.

Easily combinable with hiking tours along the Wales Coast Path is a pilgrimage to bucolic Carmarthenshire, which inspired Thomas' famed poem "Fern Hill." It's also easy to reach New Quay, the Ceredigion fishing village that became the wellspring for the fictional village of Llareggub and his poem "Quite Early One Morning."

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When eating chicken wings, which part do you like best?

- Drums / legs
- Flats / wings
- I like both equally
- I never eat wings

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If you go

The Welsh like to joke about the fact that it costs \$10 in bridge tolls to enter their land, but there's no charge to leave. Well worth the tariff, a visit to Dylan Thomas Centennial (www.dt100.info) begins with a trip to Swansea (three hours west of London) and the Dylan Thomas Centre. Although centennial events are being staged in many Welsh and UK venues, this is a great place to start your journey; you can pick up maps and a picturesque set of walking guides.

www.swansea.gov.uk/dylanthomas.

Literature Wales is sponsoring a wide range of special events including kayaking trips, pony trap rides and behind the scenes tours. For more details visit dylanthomas.com/2014-



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Although Thomas is celebrated for his own work, his readings of Shakespeare and the great British poets were often standing-room-only events attracting the likes of T.S. Eliot, Charlie Chaplin, Arthur Miller and William Faulkner. His out-of-town tryouts included a solo performance of "Under Milk Wood" at the Salad Bowl cafe on Tenby's north cliff.

centenary or visitwales.com.

To hear Prince Charles reading Thomas' "Fern Hill" go to <http://tinyurl.com/o6wcqdb>.

This reading, his last UK performance before his fatal journey to America, is just one more landmark on the Thomas trail, which also includes the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea, his hometown.

The hub of the Dylan Thomas 100 Festival Program, this collection is a literary landmark that offers a chance to see the writer's notebooks, hear readings of his poetry and join events featuring some of Wales' best known writers. Because Thomas was a close friend of leading novelists, playwrights and poets on both sides of the Atlantic, the museum provides a panoramic view of the mid-20th-century literary canon.

"One of the most beguiling things about Dylan's social character," wrote his friend, agent and biographer John Malcolm Brinnin, "was the spell-like illusion of intimacy he would cast upon anyone who came near. Everyone, it seemed, could command his intimate attention."

This intimacy, which extends to today's audiences, goes far beyond readings of his poetry at funerals everywhere. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of a Dylan Thomas walking tour is the relationship between his work and village life. As often as he visited world capitals for his legendary command performances and partying, Thomas traveled under a cloud of nostalgia for his native land.

To see why, visit Swansea's Cwmdonkin Park, where Thomas -- as he described it in his radio broadcast, "Reminiscences of Childhood" -- "endured with pleasure, the first agonies of unrequited love, the first slow boiling in the belly of a bad poem and the struggling and raven-locked self-dramatization of what, at that time, seemed incurable adolescence."

Although the Dylan Thomas trail is only a small portion of the 870-mile-long Wales Coast Path, it provides an intimate look at the literary life of an inspiring writer. His early departure from his celebrated literary life remains the central mystery of life. Walking the Welsh paths he loved makes one consider the great poems he might have written into his 40s and beyond.



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